ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

WASTED LIVES

Modernity and its Outcasts

Wasted Lives

WASTED LIVES

Modernity and its Outcasts

Zygmunt Bauman

polity

First published in 2004 by Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Editorial office:
Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Marketing and production:
Blackwell Publishing Ltd
108 Cowley Road
Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

Distributed in the USA by
Blackwell Publishing Inc.
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

ISBN: 0-7456-3164-9
ISBN: 0-7456-3165-7 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library and has been applied for from the Library of Congress.

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Berling
by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books, Bodmin, Cornwall

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.polity.co.uk

Contents

Acknowledgements

My thanks go, as so many times in the past, to John Thompson for his spot-on critical insights and priceless advice, and to Ann Bone for the loving care and exemplary patience with which she spots and corrects the author's errors and removes the traces of his slackness and negligence.

Introduction

There is more than one way in which the story of modernity (or any story for that matter) can be told. This book is one of such stories.

Talking of Aglaura, one of the bizarre yet eerily familiar cities listed in *Le città invisibili*, Italo Calvino's Marco Polo said that he could hardly go 'beyond the things its own inhabitants have always repeated', even if their stories jarred with what he himself thought he was looking at. 'You would like to say what it is, but everything previously said of Aglaura imprisons your words and obliges you to repeat rather than say.' And so, securely ensconced within the city walls made of the ever repeated stories after the fashion in which the ramparts of some cities are made of stones, Aglaurians 'live in an Aglaura which grows only with the name Aglaura and they do not notice the Aglaura that grows on the ground'. How could they, indeed, behave differently? After all, 'the city they speak of has much of what is needed to exist, whereas the city that exists on its site, exists less.'[1]

The residents of Leonia, another of Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, would say, if asked, that their passion is 'the enjoyment of new and different things'. Indeed, each morning they 'wear brand-new clothing, take from the latest model refrigerator still unopened tins, listening to the last-minute jingles from the most up-to-date radio'. But each morning 'the remains of yesterday's Leonia await the garbage truck' and a stranger like Marco Polo, looking, so to speak, through the cracks in Leonia's story-walls, would wonder whether the Leonians' true passion is not instead 'the joy of expelling, discarding, cleansing themselves of a recurrent

impurity'. Why otherwise would street cleaners be 'welcomed like angels', even if their mission is 'surrounded by respectful silence', and understandably so – 'once things have been cast off nobody wants to have to think about them further.' As the Leonians excel in their chase after novelties, 'a fortress of indestructible leftovers' surrounds the city, 'dominating it on every side, like a chain of mountains'.

Do the Leonians see those mountains, you may ask? Sometimes they might, particularly when a freak gust of wind wafts into their spick'n'span homes a stench reminiscent of a rubbish heap rather than of the all-fresh, all-glittering, all-fragrant innards of novelty shops. Once that has happened, it is hard for them to avert their eyes; they would have to look worriedly, with fear and trembling, at the mountains – and be horrified by what they saw. They would abhor the mountains' ugliness and detest them for blotting the landscape – for being foul, unsavoury, offending and altogether revolting, for harbouring dangers they know and dangers unlike anything they knew before, for stocking the hazards they can see and such hazards as they can't even guess. They would not like what they saw, and they wouldn't want to look at it any longer. They would hate the leftovers of their yesterday's reveries as passionately as they loved the brand-new dresses and up-to-the-minute toys. They would wish the mountains away, would want them to disappear – to be dynamited, crushed, pulverized or dissolved. They would complain against the sloth of the street cleaners, leniency of foremen and complacency of bosses.

Even more than the leftovers themselves the Leonians would abhor the idea of their indestructibility. They would be horror-stricken by the news that the mountains they keenly wish away are reluctant to degrade, deteriorate and decompose on their own, as well as being resistant, nay immune, to solvents. Hoping against hope, they wouldn't take in the simple truth that the odious heaps of waste can only *not be* if they have not been *made to be* (by them, the Leonians!) in the first place. They would refuse to accept that (as Marco Polo's message goes, which Leonians would not hear) 'as the city renews every day, it preserves all of itself in its only definitive form: yesterday's sweepings piled up on the sweepings of the day before yesterday and of all its days and years and

decades.' Leonians would not listen to Marco Polo's message since what the message would tell them (were they willing to hear it, that is) was that rather than preserving what they claim to love and desire, they only manage to make the rubbish permanent. Only the useless, the off-putting, the repellent, the poisonous and the frightening is tough enough to be still there as the time passes.

Following the Aglaurians' example, Leonians live daily, we may say, in a Leonia which 'grows only with the name Leonia', blissfully unaware of that other Leonia which grows on the ground. At least they avert or shut their eyes, trying hard not to see it. Exactly as in the Aglaurian case, the city they speak of 'has much of what they need to exist'. Most importantly, it contains the story of the passion for novelty which they go on repeating daily so that the passion they speak of can forever be born again and replenished and the story of that passion could go on being told, heard, avidly listened to and staunchly believed.

It takes a stranger like Marco Polo to ask: what in the end is the Leonians' staple product? The enchanting, brand new things, enticingly fresh and seductively mysterious, since virgin and untried – or rather the ever rising mounds of waste? How, for instance, is their passion for fashion to be explained? What, indeed, is that fashion about – is it about substituting more beautiful things for things less adorable, or about the joy felt when things are thrown on the rubbish heap after first being stripped of their glamour and allure? Are things thrown away because of their ugliness, or are they ugly because they have been earmarked for the tip?

Tricky questions, indeed. Answering them is no less tricky a task. The answers would depend on stories echoing between the walls that rose out of the memories of the stories told, repeated, listened to, ingested and absorbed.

Were the questions to be addressed to a Leonian, the answers would be that more and more new and newer things must be produced to replace other things that are less prepossessing or useful or have lost their use. But if you ask Marco Polo, a traveller, a sceptical stranger, an uninvolved outsider, a baffled newcomer – he would answer that in Leonia things are declared useless and promptly thrown away because other, new and improved objects

of desire beckon, and that they are bound to be thrown away to make room for such newer things. He would answer that in Leonia it is today's novelty that makes yesterday's novelty obsolete and destined for the rubbish heap. Both answers ring true; both seem to convey the Leonians' life story. So in the end the choice depends on whether one story is being monotonously repeated or, on the contrary, thoughts are roaming free in the space free of stories . . .

Ivan Klima remembers dining with the President of the Ford company in his residence in Detroit. The guest asked the host, who boasted of the rising number of spanking new Ford cars leaving the assembly line, 'how he removed all those cars from the world once they'd reached the end of their service'. 'He replied that this was no problem. Anything that was manufactured could vanish without trace, it was merely a technical problem. And he smiled at the thought of a totally empty, cleansed world.'

After the dinner, Klima went to see how that 'technical problem' was dealt with. Used cars, cars declared used up and so no longer wanted, were squeezed by gigantic presses into neat metal boxes. 'But those metal boxes did not vanish from the world . . . They probably melt down the crushed metal to make iron and new steel for new cars, and thus rubbish is transformed into new rubbish, only slightly increased in quantity.'

Having heard the story and seen what it was allegedly reporting, Klima muses: 'No, this isn't a mere technical problem. Because the spirit of dead things rises over the earth and over the waters, and its breath forebodes evil.'[2]

This book is devoted to that 'not a mere technical problem'. It tries to explain what else it is in addition to being technical, and why it is a problem in the first place.

Our planet is full.

This is, let me make myself clear, not a statement in physical or even human geography. In terms of physical space and the spread of human cohabitation, the planet is anything but full. On the contrary, the total size of sparsely populated or depopulated lands viewed as uninhabitable and incapable of supporting human life seems to be expanding rather than shrinking. As *technological*

progress offers (at a rising cost, to be sure) new means of survival in habitats that were previously deemed unfit for human settlement, it also erodes the ability of many habitats to sustain the populations they previously used to accommodate and feed. Meanwhile *economic* progress renders once effective modes of making a living unviable and impracticable, thereby adding to the size of the wastelands laying fallow and abandoned.

'The planet is full' is a statement *in sociology and political science*. It refers not to the state of the earth, but to the ways and means of its inhabitants. It signals the disappearance of 'no man's lands', territories fit to be defined and/or treated as void of human habitation as well as devoid of sovereign administration – and thus open to (clamouring for!) colonization and settlement. Such territories, now largely absent, for a greater part of modern history played the crucial role of dumping grounds for the human waste turned out in ever rising volumes in the parts of the globe affected by the processes of 'modernization'.

The production of 'human waste', or more correctly wasted humans (the 'excessive' and 'redundant', that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay), is an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity. It is an inescapable side-effect of *order-building* (each order casts some parts of the extant population as 'out of place', 'unfit' or 'undesirable') and of *economic progress* (that cannot proceed without degrading and devaluing the previously effective modes of 'making a living' and therefore cannot but deprive their practitioners of their livelihood).

For a greater part of modern history, however, huge parts of the globe ('backward', 'underdeveloped' parts, when measured by the ambitions of the already modern, that is obsessively modernizing, sector of the planet) stayed wholly or partly unaffected by modernizing pressures, thus escaping their 'overpopulation' effect. Confronted with the modernizing niches of the globe, such ('premodern', 'underdeveloped') parts tended to be viewed and treated as lands able to absorb the excess of the population of the 'developed countries'; natural destinations for the export of 'redundant humans' and obvious, ready-made dumping sites for the human

waste of modernization. The disposal of human waste produced in the 'modernized' and still 'modernizing' parts of the globe was the deepest meaning of colonization and imperialist conquests – both made possible, and in fact inevitable, by the power differential continuously reproduced by the stark inequality of 'development' (euphemistically called 'cultural lag'), resulting in turn from the confinement of the modern fashion of life to a 'privileged' section of the planet. That inequality allowed the modern part of the globe to seek, and find, *global* solutions to *locally* produced 'overpopulation' problems.

This situation could last as long as modernity (that is, a perpetual, compulsive, obsessive and addictive *modernization*) remained a privilege. Once modernity turned, as it was intended and bound to, into the universal condition of humankind, the effects of its planetary dominion have come home to roost. As the triumphant progress of modernization has reached the furthest lands of the planet and practically the totality of human production and consumption has become money and market mediated, and the processes of the commodification, commercialization and monetarization of human livelihoods have penetrated every nook and cranny of the globe, global solutions to locally produced problems, or global outlets for local excesses, are no longer available. Just the contrary is the case: all localities (including, most notably, the highly modernized ones) have to bear the consequences of modernity's global triumph. They are now faced with the need to seek (in vain, it seems) *local* solutions to *globally* produced problems.

To cut the long story short: the new fullness of the planet means, essentially, *an acute crisis of the human waste disposal industry*. While the production of human waste goes on unabated and rises to new heights, the planet is fast running short of refuse dumps and the tools of waste recycling.

As if to make the already troublesome state of affairs even more complex and threatening, a new powerful source of 'wasted humans' has been added to the original two. Globalization has become the third, and currently the most prolific and least controlled, 'production line' of human waste or wasted humans. It has also put a new gloss on the old problem and imbued it with an altogether new significance and unprecedented urgency.

The global spread of the modern form of life set loose and put in motion enormous and constantly rising quantities of human beings bereaved of their heretofore adequate ways and means of survival in both the biological and social/cultural sense of that notion. For the resulting population pressures, the old familiar colonialist pressures but reversed in direction, there are no readily available outlets – either for 'recycling' or for safe 'disposal'. Hence the alarms about the overpopulation of the globe; hence also the new centrality of 'immigrant' and 'asylum seeker' problems to the contemporary political agenda and the rising role played by vague and diffuse 'security fears' in the emergent global strategies and the logic of power struggles.

The essentially elemental, unregulated and politically uncontrolled nature of globalization processes has resulted in the establishment of 'frontier-land' conditions of a new sort in the planetary 'space of flows' to which a great part of the power capacity once lodged in the sovereign modern states has been transferred. The brittle and incurably precarious equilibrium of frontier-land settings rests notoriously on 'mutually assured vulnerability'. Hence the alarms about deteriorating security which magnify the already plentiful supplies of 'security fears' while simultaneously shifting public concerns and the outlets for individual anxiety away from the economic and social roots of trouble and towards concerns for personal (bodily) safety. In its turn, the thriving 'security industry' rapidly becomes one of the principal branches of waste production and the paramount factor in the waste disposal problem.

This is, in the broadest of outlines, the setting for contemporary life. The 'problems of (human) waste and (human) waste disposal' weigh ever more heavily on the liquid modern, consumerist culture of individualization. They saturate all the most important sectors of social life, tending to dominate life strategies and colour the most important life activities, prompting them to generate their own *sui generis* waste: stillborn, unfit, invalid or unviable human relationships, born with the mark of impending wastage.

These issues, and some of their derivatives, are the major themes of this book. Their analysis here is preliminary. My major, perhaps even only, concern is to offer an alternative viewpoint from which stock can be taken of those aspects of modern life